



SPENDING

MASTERING YOUR MONEY

by Jake Barnett

Money is an essential aspect of life. We can't avoid being involved with it. It can be a good servant or a terrible master. Either way it affects every other area of our lives.

Jesus reminds us of this when He asks, "If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" (Lk. 16:11). This implies that the way we handle our material possessions is a good indicator of our progress toward spiritual maturity.

Are you in control of your finances? Are you "trustworthy in handling worldly wealth"?

THE DANGERS OF OVERSPENDING. There are various causes of financial difficulty, but the most common is overspending. This may involve spending all

the money we have, leaving none for giving or saving for the future. Spending everything we have almost inevitably leads to living on credit, which is spending money we don't have. Living on credit reduces our future resources, initiating a vicious cycle of increased borrowing that can lead to a seemingly hopeless situation.

Overspending and indebtedness can develop at any age. One young man preparing for marriage suddenly realized that he had to extricate himself from a financial trap first. He owed money for a classy guitar, guitar lessons he had never completed, and many other things. A young family had to delay buying a home because monthly payments for a new car and a fur coat disqualified them from obtaining an additional loan.

People with high incomes are not

immune. One young professional with a six-figure income came to me when his credit structure began to collapse. He was enjoying everything money and credit could buy, including a 5,000-square-foot house and two resort condominiums—one in the mountains and another on the sea. He had refused to total his obligations. When he finally did they exceeded a million dollars!

THE ROOTS OF OVERSPENDING

There may be psychological factors behind overspending. The young professional I just mentioned felt deprived as a child. He was determined that he and his family would enjoy everything life had to offer. Others think poorly of themselves and try to compensate with displays of affluence. Some seek emotional security in material things when they do not feel

loved and accepted. More often the problem has simpler roots. Some people simply don't know how to manage their financial affairs.

This problem is especially critical for people who refuse the counsel of family or Christian friends, or for whom such counsel is not available because they neither maintain family ties nor have a strong church home.

Our society's insistence on instant gratification encourages overspending. The advertising that surrounds us, creating artificial "needs," is another powerful stimulus to overspending.

All of these roots of overspending find fertile ground in the soil of materialism—the age-old desire for and slavery to material things. Materialism expresses itself in covetousness (greedy desire for what doesn't belong to us) and possessiveness (selfishly clinging to everything we have). Overspending is almost always closely related to this inordinate desire for things.

A GOD'S-EYE VIEW OF MONEY

I believe the answer to gaining control of our finances lies deeper than good rules of financial management. These are necessary, but more fundamental is the process of growing into maturity in a very significant area of life: the mind. As we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, we can "test and approve what God's will is" (Ro. 12:2).

We begin by discovering what the Bible teaches and building a biblically-based philosophy of material possessions. A philosophy is simply a system of principles that guide our practice. If we are to achieve control, our philosophy must be based on God's revealed truth. Here are a few essential building blocks:

Material Things Are God's Blessing. God created the material universe as a provision, not as a temptation. He described His creation as "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Money represents material things. It functions as a medium of exchange and a store of value, facilitating the use of God's creation in many ways.

If the material things God created are good, so is the money we substitute for them in exchanges. Therefore our attitude toward both material things and money should be positive.

I have often given audiences a quick reflex test by asking them to list the emotions they associate with money. Often the lists are dominated by worry, concern, guilt, or desire. These emotions should be replaced by praise, joy, and thanksgiving, resulting in the con-

stant celebration of God's creation. The correct attitude toward finances is essential to controlling them.

Man Is an Accountable Steward. Responsibility is a corollary of freedom. All through the Scriptures individuals are held accountable for their attitudes, decisions, and actions. The Scriptures establish the principle of individual ownership, or private property, by prohibiting theft (the Eighth Commandment). Ownership of property implies control of it (Mt. 20:15, Acts 5:4).

But with our right to control what we own comes our responsibility to use it as God's stewards, accountable to Him. This responsibility of stewardship is an individual matter. In Jesus' parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30), each steward was held responsible and rewarded or rebuked according to his diligence. The Apostle Paul set the example of assuming responsibility for his financial needs, even though he had the right to be supported by those who benefited from his ministry (2 Thess. 3:6-10). He encouraged his followers to work to meet their own needs and to help others (Eph. 4:28, 1 Thess. 4:11-12).

Unless we demonstrate our trustworthiness in these "little things" of material wealth, we cannot expect God to entrust to us the true riches of eternal value (Lk. 16:11).

We Are Responsible for Others. A genuine brotherhood of interest and of sharing, in which the fruits of individual stewardship are available to meet the needs of others in the community, is a wonderful environment in which to learn financial stewardship. The early Church exemplified this kind of community (Acts 4:32-37). Paul prescribed it when he wrote, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4).

The interest we express in others should include material things. We may express this interest by giving and receiving, or by wise counsel. Someone who habitually overspends can take a significant step toward recovery by submitting his affairs to the analysis and counsel of members of his Christian community who are qualified and willing to counsel him. The man I mentioned with the million-dollar problem found that five of his Christian brothers were willing to assist him with both money and counsel.

GETTING A GRIP ON FINANCES

Here are some basic principles necessary for financial control:

- *Live below your income.* "The wise man saves for the future, but the foolish man spends whatever he gets" (Prov. 21:20, *TLB*).

Our standard of living must be such that total expenditures are less than income. This requires a philosophy of life that keeps material things in their proper perspective. If we are living in true Christian community, there will be resources to meet even severe emergencies without violating this rule.

This is an essential step toward financial freedom. It is particularly important that this rule never be violated because violations are cumulative and inevitably make tomorrow's problems worse than today's. Yet it is so obvious that it is often overlooked, and its violation is the source of nearly all financial difficulty.

- *Establish priorities for the use of your resources.* Much has been written about the proper order of priorities for a Christian, but your basic guidance should come from God's Word. Living below your income implies an orderly control of necessary expenditures and at least a small surplus that can be used for optional priorities—including giving and saving.

- *Master your credit.* "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender" (Prov. 22:7).

In our society credit is the greatest single impediment to financial control. It is not only readily available, but is foisted on consumers through the clever advertising of both money and product. Credit as a convenience is desirable—for example, a charge card to expedite travel, auto rentals, etc. But it is best to have a credit card that doesn't even permit the deferral of payments at high rates of interest.

Using credit for capital items that appreciate—that is, they gain value over time—and that would be nearly impossible to purchase for cash, like houses, can be advantageous. One might even make a case for using credit to buy capital items that depreciate slowly, like a car, though I personally advise against this in favor of purchasing an older vehicle for cash. (Statistics prove that the cost of buying, insuring, and operating an older vehicle is *always* less per mile than for a new one, even considering the cost of repair.)

For consumable items—things that wear out rapidly or necessarily disappear when used—buying on credit is simply living beyond your income! Its major function is to serve materialism. It is using tomorrow's income to fulfill today's